Racial Discrimination of Gay Men In Online Dating

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Abstract

In hopes of promoting understanding of the supposedly welcoming gay community, the racial gap for power within the community must be brought to light. By understanding sexual racism, fetishization, and the dynamics within a gay relationship, a major problem arises that shows a trend in the dominance of white mine within the society. The online gay dating scene is an area that is underrepresented in the field of research, as is any study of sexuality and sexual orientation. In this research, racism is analyzed by comparing the experience gay men of color have in the dating scene with the added effects of sexual racism. Experiences from gay men of color are documented through a series of interviews done in an extensive literature review. To understand the role that online dating applications such as Grindr were used to document any forms of blatant discrimination on users' profiles around the Kean University area.

Introduction

It is contradictory that a community of minorities would be so prejudicial, distasteful, and vile towards each other. A group of people who have been, and still are, looked down upon for expressing themselves by society for centuries, still have their own problems within their own group. Despite what is shown by the mainstream media, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community is not a safe place or free haven for many of those who identify as part of the queer world. In this paper, the gay male community will be of focus. To call it a single gay community would be wrong and would show the lack of diversity within the divided community (Epstein, 1999). According to Niels Teunis, a professor in Human Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University, some wish to acknowledge this view "because they want to

draw attention to the power imbalance that exists within the gay community…" (Teunis, 2007). Some people, on the other hand, want to be called a single gay community to show those outsides of the community how there are no divides within the community.

Many people wish not to show the diversity within the community in order to show an image that would further help their political agenda that would appeal to the mass public (Han 2009; Han and Choi, 2018; Teunis, 2007). This is prominent when it comes to advertisements that fight for gay rights, such as gay men fighting in the military to gay marriage. These advertisements usually just depict gay men as being wealthy, conservative, and white (Bérubé, 2001; Han 2009; Han and Choi, 2018; Seidman, 2002; Walters, 2014).

This image is not something that just came into existence by the media but rather it started in the 1970s as a push for homogeneity by the gay community themselves (Armstrong, 2002). When referencing the same work of Elizabeth Armstrong who is a professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley and a writer of the gay movement of the 1900s, Teunis says that in order to become more homogenetic, the community must "assume(ing) whiteness in many of its main organizations…" (Teunis, 2007). In order for the community to become one, the community tried to make themselves appear as "white" as they can to the mass public.

However, throughout this paper, to cause less confusion, the author will refer to the gay community as a single gay community, or refer to a specific gay community. For example, the gay Asian community or the gay white community. While they are both communities of gay men, different groups face different problems within the community while some overlap with other groups. Many of the overlapping issues come from racial discrimination.

No matter what community someone goes to or looks at, there is always a form of racial discrimination. The gay community is no different. When dealing with racism in the gay community, gay white men and gay men of color will view the racism within the community in two completely different ways. To a gay man of color, "racism is racism", no matter who is being racist or who is being discriminated against based on their race and ethnicity. However, gay white men will not see it as racism, but just as a "personal preference" by excluding gay men of color when looking for sexual and romantic partners (Han and Choi, 2018). It has been shown in many studies that a gay white male will prefer another white gay male rather than a gay man of color for their sexual and romantic partners (Phua and Kaufman, 2003; Teunis, 2007; Smith, 2014; Lundquist and Lin, 2015; Rafalow et al., 2017; Han and Choi, 2017).

When conducting his own research, Teunis found an interesting issue when asking gay white men about the racism in the gay community, getting one of two responses. The first would be a white gay male saying he has a non-white gay friend who only dates other non-white gay men; the combination that would always appear was an African American friend who only dated Asian men (Teunis, 2007). The second response given is how the gay white man will try to switch the question about "the perceived 'homophobia' of African American communities" (Teunis, 2007). For a gay white man, it is unlikely that all of them have been exposed to the sexuality problems within the African American community to make such a claim. This just goes to show and further exemplify how the words racism or race automatically, to white man, equated to something involving African Americans.

When looking at racism in the gay community, the focus must be on sexual racism. High levels of racism within the gay community are targeted at black men, Latino men, and Asian men

by gay white men (Bérubé, 2001; Choi et al. 2011; Colon, 2001; Han, 2007; Han et al., 2013; Ramirez, 2003; Ridge et al. 1999; Teunis, 2007). Chung-suk Han, professor of sociology and anthropology at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont, and Kyung-hee Choi, professor at the University of California in San Francisco, California, explains the concept of sexual racism created in 1976 by Charles Herbert Stember by saying it was "to examine racialized sexual desires between heterosexual men, the deep-rooted sexual stereotypes of black women and men lead to such desires, as well as the role that such stereotypes play in preventing interracial relationships" (Han and Choi, 2018). Sexual racism shows that these stereotypes lead to the fetishization of racial groups for sexual pleasure and used the stereotypes to push away potential partners just based on race.

The sexual fetishization of race is a huge issue for gay men of color that plagues the gay community. Firstly, the roles within a gay relationship must be looked at and understood. There are three main roles in a relationship that gay men identify as: they are top, bottom, and versatile. While they do refer to the sexual positions in which the men take, they also have more of an unlining meaning to them. According to Teunis, "a top is expecting to take initiative and be concerned about the sexual pleasure of the bottom, whereas the bottom literally receives the pleasure more passively" (Teunis, 2007). It indicates a power relationship (Teunis, 2007) between those two is that the bottom is in control and the top is there to make sure his bottom feels good and safe.

When race is involved, the roles get changed. When Teunis interviewed a 48-year-old African American man, the man explains his experience with a white man and why he does not go out with white men who identify as tops. Paul, the African American man, says that he has

had times when he was a bottom and that the top, who would always be a white top, would call him racially derogatory terms while being in a sexual act. Paul goes on to talk about a guy he met online that seemed okay until he invited Paul to his home to engage in sexual acts and called him a racial term. Paul says he always turns these men down, but for some reason, he said he went to the guy's house. Paul said the guy was excited, so he let it happen even though he knew it was not okay (Teunis, 2007).

Teunis also interviewed many other gay African American men, such as a 43-year-old named Thomas, who has had white men who will only care about the size of his penis. Thomas has said that he has had a white man walk up to him and ask about his penis size and not even ask about his name (Teunis, 2007). The man instantly becomes objectified by the white man, as if the body is just disregarded for the man's penis. Thomas also went on to say that the white men will assume he is just a top. If he said he was a switch, they would end the conversation and walk away. The white men only cared if he was top based on the stereotype of black men having a large penis. If he was anything but a full top or did not have a large penis, the white man would have no interest in him.

Going back to how Teunis first explained the dynamics of the roles a top and bottom play in the relationship, it can be seen that his statement would work if the two partners were of the same race. When the partners are of different races, as it is in the cases when talking about the two African American men, that the white man will always be put in the power role by forcing their African American partner into a role without giving them room to want something different. If a black man is to be in the top position, he must be big and rough, and yet he must always do what will make the white man who is in the bottom position feel good at all times. If a black man

is to be in the bottom position, he will be controlled by the white man and be subjected to verbal, racial derogatory terms in the name of race play.

In research done by Han and Choi, they interviewed a gay Latino man about the problem of the desirability of whiteness. The Latino man said, "It's like the more European that you have, the better off you are. And then the more like indigenous you look, it's, it's not the same" (qtd. In Han and Choi, 2018). For a gay Latino, he has to look more European and less native. He must have had a lighter skin tone and be able to pass off as white to be considered desirable as a sexual partner to the larger gay white community.

Gay Asian men are also highly subjected to sexual racism. Gay Asian men are considered unattractive in the west by the large white gay community and are always perceived as feminine, making these men highly subjected to "sissyphobia" (Ayres, 1999; Chesebro, 2001; Drummond 2005; Han, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010; Phua 2002). Sissyphobia is when gay masculine men have a hatred towards gay men who express more feminine because they hate the stereotypical of the gay feminine man which the media portrays. These men who have sissyphobia are usually gay men who exert hypermasculinity to show that they are a "man's man", and not a tiny feminine man. Those who have this hatred towards more feminine gay men act this way as a sign of inner homophobia.

Since the stereotype of gay Asian men is that they are feminine, these men are automatically considered to be the bottom and be submissive. Han, Proctor, and Choi noticed two facts during their research; one, that some gay Asian men would try to pass as more masculine or even non-Asian, and two, some gay Asian men would try and distance themselves from other gay Asian men and only wanted to be associated with gay white men (Han et al.,

2013). The reason was that, as one person they interviewed noted, "Physical beauty, the standard is the model, and all the models are white" (as quoted in Han et al., 2013). The participant understood that in the large gay community, physical beauty was the most important aspect of attraction when a gay man looked for a partner. However, the standard of beauty was based on the models that are being used and shown in the gay community. The problem is that all the models are white men who all follow the same gym-body look. In order to seem more appealing to gay white men, some gay Asian men tried to fit this standard of beauty, resulting in them pushing away from their own racial and ethnic groups.

In 2009, Han noticed that most of the gay Asian men he spoke to during an experiment understood that the hostility by highly masculine gay men comes from the racial stigma that Asian men were submissive and feminine (Han, 2009). These gay Asian men, instead of trying to fit in with the rest of the gay masculine community, decided to embrace the stereotype that Asian men are feminine and became drag queens. Drag queens, however, face discrimination within the gay community because they are seen as failed men who symbolized the highly feminine gay man (Berkowitz et al., 2007; Han, 2009; Rupp and Taylor, 2003; Schacht and Underwood, 2004). Even though more discrimination can happen, there is still an upside to being a drag queen. As Han points out "gay Asian drag queens understand that being in drag is a way for them to gain notoriety and social capital in the larger gay community" (Han, 2009). By being a successful drag queen, a gay man can move up the social hierarchy in the gay community. In the sense with a gay Asian man, it can make him more desirable as a partner and can move him up to gain new opportunities within the gay community that he would not have been able to get before. Han also

notes, that being a drag queen has helped gay Asian men feel more comfortable with their bodies and improve their self-esteem (Han, 2009).

Method and Methodology

Looking at the research, the majority of the researchers used the method of asking gay men who went out to gay clubs looking for a partner about their experiences with racism in the gay dating environment. However, my question is whether the same racial discrimination issues are faced when using online dating websites. For this experiment, I used two websites. The first being the popular gay dating website named Grindr and the second being the website named Douchebags of Grindr. Grindr is a gay dating website that allows someone to chat with other gay men in their area. The phone application would find gay men, transgender men and women, bisexual men, and men who want to be sexual with other men. The website Douchebags of Grindr is a website where people can post screenshots of users of Grindr whose profile shows blatant discrimination or rudeness.

Results

When using the site myself, I did not find anyone who would say on their profile that they exclude a particular group of people. What I did find were people who would state what they were specifically looking for in terms of physical traits. These traits would say that these gay men are looking for would be "prefer black", "fem bttm only" or "only looking for latinos". These traits would not show any direct racial discrimination but would show direct racial exclusivity.

When going on the website, Douchebags of Grindr, anyone can see that there are plenty of racial discrimination profiles that exist on Grindr. However, Grinder has stated that they do not tolerate discrimination on their dating website. When opening the dating website application on a phone for the first time, the user will get a message that tells them to report any profiles that are "... displaying discriminatory statements…" in order to make the website a better environment. However, my experiment and gathering information based on gay men's dating profiles did not show as much racial discrimination as the other researchers have found.

Conclusion

There is, without a question, the problem of racial discrimination within the gay community. Researchers have found that gay men of color have been subjected to racial sexualization and fetishization. As stated before, most of the researchers went out and asked gay men of color about the racial discrimination they faced. In my experiment, I used online dating profiles as my method of research. However, the dating profiles did not show as much racial discrimination as what is reported by those who go out to clubs; that does not mean there is no

racism on online dating sites. There are many reasons as to why my research came out differently than that of other researchers.

First, I only used one dating website called Grindr. There are many different dating websites and some are only for gay men. Different websites have their own ways and means of dealing with discrimination. There can be one website where there is no racial discrimination at all and there could be another website that completely excuses one's race or ethnicity. A different dating website can have more or less racial discrimination depending on the website.

Secondly, people on a dating website can lie on their profiles. Someone's profile may be fine, but when talking to them they can show their true colors. Over half of the profiles on Grindr do not show their face, have a picture that is not of a person, or just do not have a profile picture at all. Lying on a profile happens too often these days. If people can pretend to be a whole different person online, there is nothing stopping them from pretending to be kind and not racist upfront.

Third, my location plays a factor in the outcome. Since the dating application uses the users' location to find other gay men, location plays a major role. For me, the men who would pop up for me would be those in the New Jersey and New York area. Most of the research I read about was done on the west coast of the United States in cities like San Francisco. If I went down to the south of New Jersey or even west, closer to Pennsylvania, I would have gotten different profiles and users to pop up. These people could behave and act very differently than those in my area.

Lastly, my race plays a part in my own findings. Just because someone does not exclude a race on their profile does not mean they aren't racist. What they say to people in direct messages,

in DMs, may be very different. As a white man, I did not have anyone message me calling me a racial slur or making derogatory remarks based on my race. My research has major flaws in terms of using my own picture on my profile. If the picture I had used was from a racial minority, then it would be highly liking that I would receive some racially derogatory messages.

Further and more in-depth research would need to be done in order to see the differences and similarities between racial discrimination in person and online. Either way, racial discrimination is still prevalent in the gay community. This is an issue that must be tackled from the inside and those within the community must try to make it changes.

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